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## ABSTRACT

Learner diaries, or dialogue journals, are popular in second language teaching. Numerous teaching, learning, evaluative, and research-related uses for them have evolved. Pedagogically, they are used to identify and allay anxiety, offer advice on specific difficulties, provide study skill and individual feedback, encourage student self-assessment, encourage curiosity about the target culture and keep personal records of foreign travel, and practice language use. For evaluation, they provide information for short-term adjustment of methods/materials and group dynamics, and for teacher assessment. In research, journals can help investigate language learner behavior, especially outside class, examine student feelings and conceptualizations, and explore how these factors relate to learning. Variables in diary research requiring consideration include journal layout, access, assignment administration, and feedback. Practical difficulties that can arise from these variables include marking or grading of entries, conflicting student and teacher purposes, conflicting teacher and administrative uses, and first-versus second-language use in entries. For diary use in class, teachers should plan their content and confidentiality, anticipate subsequent guidance to students, decide to what extent entries are a required activity, and specify diary uses. (MSE)

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## LEARNER DIARIES : POSSIBILITIES AND PITFALLS

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### Introduction

The value of learner diaries has been drawn to the attention of the language teaching community by publications such as Bailey 1983 (and the earlier works mentioned in that article), and their use is now quite widespread, especially amongst those interested in learner autonomy. The available literature on this subject tends to adopt a very positive tone, but this may be a distortion due to the well-known fact that only 'successful experiments' tend to reach publication, and that their 'successful' aspects tend to be emphasised. Our personal contacts suggest that many diary projects are aborted or found to be unsatisfactory in various ways, and our own work has revealed many pitfalls. This paper attempts to help researchers and teachers to clarify their thinking about diaries by listing the purposes for which they may be used, showing some practical consequences of conflicts between these purposes, and offering a checklist of issues on which decisions have to be made.

In keeping with this generalising orientation, we devote only this one paragraph to a description of our own diary work in 1986-7. We worked with three groups of learners ( $N=74$ ), all on a full-time General English course, studying for periods of between three weeks and two years. They were asked to complete two A4 pages daily for seven to ten days, and were given prompts for topics such as 'in-class activities', 'out-of-class activities', 'my problems' and 'what I have learnt'. Our aim was to provide factual input for two purposes: for counselling the learners on their study and language use habits, and for research purposes. In the latter instance we were looking for variables which would explain differences in rates of language improvement. We found three main candidate variables: *informativity*, the amount of concrete information included in the diaries; *anxiety*, including all indications of stress, worry, confusion, depression, self-denigration etc.; and *leisure FL use*, the amount of time spent in social interaction with native speakers outside class. In fact only the last of these significantly correlated (+0.33, sig. 0.02), with overall language improvement. Informativity correlated with scores on end-of-unit 'achievement' tests of specific material taught, but not with 'proficiency' tests measuring general language performance. Anxiety did not correlate at all, perhaps because we had failed to distinguish its 'facilitating' and 'debilitating' varieties (Alpert and Haber 1960).

We now turn from our own project to general discussion.

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## Learner Diaries

### Uses

The largest group of possible diary uses appear to be the pedagogical ones, most of which involve establishing effective channels of communication between teacher and learner as an input to later face-to-face interaction with some kind of 'counselling' orientation. We can subdivide these uses as follows:

- (a) to identify and attempt to allay debilitating anxiety;
- (b) to offer advice on specific learning difficulties;
- (c) to provide a basis for counselling in individualised study techniques;
- (d) to provide a basis for formative feedback on independent project work;
- (e) to encourage learners to assess their own performance in specific linguistic areas and self-prescribe remedial action;
- (f) to encourage similar self-analysis and action in relation to target language behaviour, especially in out-of-class activities (e.g. maximising native-speaker contact).

Next we mention two uses or purposes which one might consider 'ends in themselves' (e.g. if FLT is thought to have general educational objectives), but which might also be indirectly conducive to active learning behaviour and thereby to acquisition. Both of these purposes are in principle independent of the diary actually being read by the teacher, though in practice reading and counselling are likely to be helpful or even essential:

- (g) to encourage curiosity about the target culture
- (h) to encourage students to keep a personal record of their stay in a foreign country.

In a category of its own - and we wonder should it come here, or first, or last in the list? - we put:

- (i) authentic (?) language practice.

Next we consider the use of diaries for evaluation purposes. This could obviously include tens of sub-categories, but we mention only:

- (j) short-term (corrective) adjustments to material and/or methods;
- (k) attempting to re-balance group dynamics by moving students (between or within classes), making different arrangements for non-whole-class work, speaking to other students about interaction problems etc;
- (l) evaluation decisions taken at course-director level, including change of teacher.

And finally an even more open-minded list of 'research' uses, of which we list four touched upon on our own project:

- (m) to discover what language learners do, especially outside class;
- (n) to find out about their feelings, especially learning-related anxiety;
- (o) to find out what they remember of their class, and how they conceptualise and categorise teaching/learning events and topics;
- (p) to explore how (m), (n) and (o) relate to success in learning.

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### Dimensions

The range of possible diary uses, then, is extensive, but it is in this very extensiveness that the main problem lies. One is constantly tempted to try to make diaries 'do everything', and whilst they can probably do more than one thing at a time, they certainly cannot do all sixteen listed above, or anything like it. One must therefore make principled decisions about what use or uses are intended, and negotiate these with the students, colleagues and everyone involved. Decisions about use have consequences for at least four vital 'dimensions' of diary projects, and confusion about use causes tension on one or more of these dimensions. The dimensions are:

- (i) *Layout*: Includes physical form of diaries - booklet, loose sheets etc. - what headings, grids, instructions etc. are provided, how much space for student writing and how this is sub-divided. Also language used - L1 or TL.
- (ii) *Access*: Can completed diaries be seen by e.g.:
  - all teachers and fellow students?
  - only one or two researchers?
  - only the diarist him/herself, who may 'edit' them for use in oral interaction with researcher?
- (iii) *Administration*: Includes such matters as when diary sheets are given out and collected, what oral orientation is given, and whether students are expected to complete a sheet every day, or only when they have something particular to say.
- (iv) *Feedback*: Is this given on the content, or on the linguistic correctness, or both, or neither? By the class teacher, the researcher, the course director....? In all cases, when the student asks for it, when criticisms are made, when 'anxiety' is expressed or implied....?

### Tensions

We now give examples of practical difficulties/tensions, from our own project, which reflect competing purposes:

- (i) *Language practice 'versus' counselling feedback*  
A normal first reaction on this issue is to say that diary entries should not be marked for linguistic correctness, or that only incidental comments should be made, as otherwise learners may not express their true feelings. But some of our learners felt that the diaries were a waste of time if *not corrected.....*
- (ii) *Course evaluation 'versus' language practice access*  
Diaries were open to class teacher inspection with the first group in our study (cohort 1), but not with cohort 2. Some cohort 1 students had 'dried up' after a few days when they realised that their teacher was reading their (sometimes critical) remarks. But in cohort 2 some students seemed un-

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happy because the teacher was not doing anything about their criticisms...

#### (iii) *Language practice 'versus' research format*

An advanced Swedish student made the following comment: "I write things in the language in which I think of them. If I hear something in English I write it in English.... What I feel I write in Swedish"

This and similar comments led us to wonder whether there would be a case for asking the students to write their diaries in their L1. Our working notes suggest: "... that writing in the L1 would reduce the filter effect of the L2. L1 diaries could be administered for research by submission of an L2 review of the diary in prose form or on audio-cassette". We have not yet tried this with our EFL students (something similar was attempted on our MSc course); one problem may be that, when the language-practice 'excuse' for diaries is removed, students may either be unmotivated to write or may conceal more as a defence against a more overtly 'psychological' investigation.

#### (iv) *Research 'versus' counselling/feedback*

We claim an 'action research' perspective, and indeed did take action when specific and soluble individual problems were thrown up during the study, but wonder if we should have done more. For example, we have lots of material on 'the good language learner', including advice on out-of-class behaviour etc. Should we give this out to all students at the start of their course with us, at the risk of 'contaminating' any research data about actual out-of-class behaviour? In principle, the problem is similar to that of the doctor field-testing new drugs - if s/he strongly suspects that drug A saves more lives, can s/he continue to give a control group drug B until the end of the experiment?

In practice, it seems that this is one of our lesser problems. At least with long-stay students, it seems best to find out about their 'unguided' style of learning and socialising before attempting to advise them; massive doses of 'how to learn' advice would probably be ineffective at the start of a course anyway.

#### (v) *Research 'versus' course evaluation/format and administration*

It may (as suggested by Parkinson et al 1982 and elsewhere) be unrealistic to expect the same research instrument to capture detailed, 'low-level' information for immediate use in formative evaluation and 'high-level' information for fundamental research.

In fact, our diaries did give us both 'evaluation' information and some kinds of 'research' information, notably on out-of-class behaviour, but we do not feel that they collected adequate and fully interpretable data on, for example, anxiety. For this, a different format/administration, e.g. "Write when you like, on blank paper", or even the use of interviews instead of

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diaries, might have been better.

### Checklist for diary design/use

Any team of teachers/researchers planning a diary study should agree on their answers to basic questions about approach and objectives before undertaking this work. Use of a checklist is recommended for this purpose. One such checklist, attempting a distillation of points made in the previous section is given below - improvements, either general or for specific context of use, will no doubt be easily found.

(i) *Instructions*

What information does the teacher wish to elicit?

(ii) *Confidentiality*

To whom will this information be subsequently available?

(iii) *Subsequent guidance*

(a) Should the students "prepare" their diary entries in any way?

(b) How much "feedback" is to be given? What form will this feedback take?

(c) To what extent does the teacher/researcher wish to influence the students' approach to the diaries?

(d) Will the students lose interest if no guidance is available?

(iv) *A compulsory or optional activity?*

To what extent are the learner-diaries an *integral* part of coursework?

(v) *Uses/exploitation of diary*

(a) Are the diaries to be used for unguided writing-practice, leading to formal, linguistic correction and identification of individual students' linguistic difficulties?

(b) How useful are learner-diaries in course and lesson evaluation? How quickly could alterations in syllabus or class activities take effect?

(c) If one gains insight into an individual's approach and reactions to the learning situation, which uses of this information would be ethical and effective?

(d) Would the diary-entries or parts thereof be useful for classroom trouble-shooter sessions?

(e) What are the expectations of the students?

(f) Is it reasonable or ethical to use learner-diaries for teacher or student-evaluation?

(g) To whom should the diaries be made available and what possible uses or misuses may arise therefrom?

(h) If the teacher reads the diary only on the request of the diarist, how can diary-keeping be justified as a useful language-learning exercise and how may the exercise be subsequently exploited if at all?

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### Conclusion

Diary studies can be immensely useful for pedagogical purposes, for course evaluation and for basic research. Even our own study, which was in many ways badly thought out and executed, yielded clear benefits in all three areas, and, most important, was considered worthwhile and even enjoyable to varying extents by most of those who participated. Nonetheless, we are far more cautious about diaries now than when we started the project. We feel that the recent enthusiasm for diaries within the profession, sparked off it seems mainly by works such as Bailey 1983 in which professional language teachers reflect on their own anxieties in going back to the classroom, has been rather excessive. 'Ordinary' FL students cannot be expected to show the same enthusiasm for diaries unless there is 'something in it for them'. This means careful planning, for without such planning the result will be, from the research/evaluation perspective, no usable data, and, from the pedagogic perspective, disruption and disappointment.

In particular, the attraction of anxiety-based explanations for student problems can lead to simplistic analysis, and to teachers/researchers 'playing at psychology' in a way which may be positively harmful.

Anxiety does not feature on our list of predictor variables, which does not mean that it should be ignored - we have probably simply failed to identify and sub-categorise it well enough - but rather that it interacts with a range of more mundane factors which we may be professionally better equipped to do something about.

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